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ABSTRACT

This chapter, from a guide for designing, implementing, and evaluating instruction and services for students with disabilities, acquaints the education administrator with the what, why, and how of interagency collaboration. System-level interagency collaboration involves joint planning, joint implementation, and joint evaluation between individuals or organizations in order to provide services for children and their families. Interagency collaboration is mandated by federal legislation as the most cost effective and efficient manner in which to provide appropriate services. To ensure the effectiveness of interagency collaboration, it is essential to understand each agency's philosophy, how services are provided, and the regulations under which each agency operates. Joint ownership and responsibility can be accomplished by requiring that all participants contribute an appropriate share of the resources needed while considering the constraints, requirements, and discretionary authority of each participating agency. Once agencies have determined a need to collaborate, team members must designate a plan with reasonable expectations for success. During the implementation phase, communication among agencies must persist. The education administrator's role is to act as the catalyst and supporter for interagency collaboration. The education system should be the catalyst as it provides a direct link to the child and the child's family and is mandated to have zero rejects. (Contains 10 references.) (JDD)

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ED 372 533

Chapter 3

Interagency Collaboration

Stephen W. Tonelson and Rebecca Waters

INTRODUCTION

Under present service provision systems, many special education students, and other students who are not labeled as exceptional, are referred from one agency to another in order to obtain services. Despite this, research indicates that difficulties with interagency collaboration continue to be of great concern (Florida Mental Health Institute, 1988 - 1989). In order to optimize the quality of services and use all resources efficiently in providing equal opportunity for students, it is essential that collaborative programs be developed -- programs that blend the funding and services provided by specific agencies. This chapter acquaints the education administrator with the what, why, and how of interagency collaboration by addressing the following questions:

1. **What is interagency collaboration?**
2. **Why is there a need for interagency collaboration?**
3. **How can interagency collaboration be implemented?**
4. **What is the administrator's role in interagency collaboration?**

1. WHAT IS INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION?

Presently, efforts to combine community resources to meet the needs of students with disabilities include a continuum of service integration models ranging from informal coordination to formal, written interagency agreements. Simple service coordination may be limited to workers who combine efforts on a particular case to meet the needs of a particular individual. Additionally, cooperative efforts may be organized to require mutual agreement between individuals or organizations that remain separate and autonomous. Collaboration, however, is different from a simple service agreement. Collaboration involves "joint planning, joint implementation, and joint evaluation between individuals or organizations" (New England Program in Teacher Education, 1973, as cited in Hord, 1986). However, like a service agreement, collaboration may occur at the system level or the client level. This chapter addresses interagency collaboration mainly at the system level.

System-level collaboration is based on the fact that no one agency can provide all necessary services for children with disabilities and their families. For

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example, a child with mild mental retardation typically has his or her educational needs met by the school. However, when a family problem precludes the child's living with his or her parent(s) and/or a health problem occurs in conjunction with the mental retardation, the school system is not expected to provide all necessary services. In order for the school to maximize this child's educational chances, social services will have to become involved. The Health Department may also need to be involved in order to ameliorate the child's health problem. Therefore, agencies must collaborate at the system level to provide effective and efficient services. This level of collaboration provides support for the school from other agencies to facilitate the education process.

A second common scenario is the transition from school to the workforce. To facilitate this transition, the school and rehabilitative services must collaborate to maximize the possibility of success. The role of the school is to provide necessary prerequisite skills to increase the likelihood that work can be found and maintained. The school system collaborates with rehabilitative services to secure a job for the student.

A third scenario may involve the juvenile probation and court system with the schools. In this case, an individual who has committed a crime and has been placed on probation is required to attend school as a criterion for probation. The school benefits in that the child must attend classes, and probation benefits in that while the child is in school he or she is more likely to learn and less likely to commit a second offense.

Typically, as can be seen from the preceding examples, system-level collaboration can include the school system, the juvenile probation and court system, social services, the health department, recreation, and rehabilitation services. For some children, all or a majority of these agencies may need to be involved in order to best meet the needs of the child and family. For other children, fewer agencies may need to collaborate.

At the client level, educators and other service providers first assess the child. Once the assessment has been completed, this team and the parent(s) write an individualized education program (IEP) designating the specific goals and objectives of all interventions. At this level, collaboration is necessary in order to ensure that all IEP goals are addressed effectively and efficiently.

In a collaborative effort, all contributing parties must see the necessity and usefulness of collaboration in order to achieve successful programming. Joint ownership and responsibility can be accomplished by requiring that all participants contribute an appropriate share of the resources needed while considering the constraints, requirements, and discretionary authority of each participating agency. Interagency collaboration requires commitment and hard work. It is essential to understand each agency's philosophy, how services are provided, and the regulations

under which each agency operates. Only when all participants understand these issues can interagency collaboration succeed.

2. WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION?

Historically, most community agencies have not coordinated services. Each agency in a community sets goals and implements programs without communicating with other appropriate agencies. This lack of communication results in a lack of coordination of services. However, coordination among agencies can help to ensure a continuation of services for students with disabilities. Stroul and Friedman (1986) set forth principles for a system of care that can be provided only through commitment to collaboration. They suggested that a system of care must be child centered, with the needs of child and family dictating the types and mix of services provided, and that "the system of care should be community-based, with the locus of services as well as the management and decision-making responsibility resting at the community level" (p. 17).

Research has indicated that fragmented services fail to consider the need to use all existing resources to provide comprehensive, child-centered services. It is only when agencies collaborate that maximum benefits are provided to help students achieve their potential in terms of independence and self-reliance. Fragmented services are not only less effective, but also more costly in terms of fiscal and human resources.

Legislative Impact

Federal legislation enacted in 1966, Public Law 89-750 (the Education of the Handicapped Act) (EHA), has evolved into legislation and mandates assuring equal rights for individuals with disabilities. More recent and more commonly known legislation, including Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, Public Law 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act), Public Law 99-457 [the Handicapped Infant and Toddler Program (Part H)], and Public Law 101-476 [the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)], require interagency collaboration in providing comprehensive services to students with disabilities. These federal mandates, as implemented by the U.S. Department of Education, require that:

- The financial responsibilities of each agency be defined in the state plan.
- Procedures be outlined for resolving interagency disputes.
- Reduction in fiscal contributions under other federal programs such as Medicaid be prohibited.

- Nonsupplanting provisions be enlarged to include noneducational resources (P.L. 99-457).

Under Part H of EHA (P.L. 99-457), the governor of each state is required to designate a lead agency to administer the Early Intervention Program for infants and toddlers (birth to age 2) and establish an Interagency Coordinating Council (Ballard, Ramirez, & Zantal-Weiner et al., 1987). Besides early intervention services, education agencies must collaborate with other agencies in the delivery of many other services to students with disabilities. These services may include any of the related services to which students are entitled or planning and implementation of transition programs.

Fiscal Consideration

The federal laws provide full service mandates for all students who have exceptionalities or are at risk for school failure and families. These mandates leave state and local communities with the obligation to provide for programs and services to individuals with disabilities, regardless of cost. In order to provide the most effective programs and demonstrate accountability of results, it is essential for interagency cooperation to exist. These mandates are to provide for a system of comprehensive and cost-effective programs designed to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities and their families.

Benefits of Interagency Collaboration

The agencies involved and the community benefit when collaboration is achieved and programs and services are coordinated (Canham, 1979, as cited in Missouri LINC, 1989). Some of these benefits include the following:

- *A reduction in service duplication*. Frequently, as individuals continue to seek help from agency after agency, duplication of assistance and services occurs. This duplication results in wasted efforts, which could be avoided by outlining explicitly who is responsible for which specific tasks.

- *Fewer service gaps or oversights*. Even with several agencies delivering services, there is no insurance that all needs are being addressed. One agency may believe that another service provider is providing for needs that, in fact, are not being met. Interagency collaboration provides for feedback and mutual exchange of ideas as well as reducing the number of overlaps and/or gaps in service.

- *Minimization of conflict/clarification of responsibility*. Agencies that share ideas and information and coordinate efforts in structured collaboration avoid the misinterpretations of needs to be met that often occur when organizations are operating independently. Not only can interagency

collaboration offer a clearer understanding of each agency's goals and purposes, the collaborative process more clearly outlines the needs of the individual as they relate to the service providers.

- *Reduction of the total cost of services*. Interagency collaboration is the most effective method for realizing fiscal accountability. As all service provision agencies face budget reductions, creative interagency collaboration is necessary to continue to provide services to children with disabilities and their families.

Pitfalls of Interagency Collaboration

Endeavors to establish a coordinated interagency effort may be frustrated by bureaucratic entanglements. It is generally agreed that to meet the complex needs of individuals with disabilities, collaboration is essential. However, the following issues represent pitfalls that any interagency collaboration effort may encounter.

Turf Issues. The roles of the various individuals and/or agencies who work with persons with disabilities rarely are defined clearly. Mental health, health, social services, education, juvenile justice, recreation, and vocational rehabilitation all are services that may need to interact in order to meet the needs of clients. However, each agency frequently has limited knowledge regarding the roles of the other agencies and wishes to protect the integrity of its own services. Often this lack of communication causes turf issues, and the result is that children and families fall between the cracks (Coleman, 1992).

Lack of Clarity on "Dollar" Issues. Limited financial resources often cause major problems during interagency collaboration. In order to ameliorate these problems, there are several ways to allocate resources collaboratively. A brief summary of methods outlined by Hodge (1981) to ameliorate problems associated with finance include the following:

- *First dollar agreements*. An agreement is made determining which agency pays first. Usually, this is the agency with primary service provision responsibility.

- *Complementary dollar agreements*. A commitment is made for each organization to pay appropriately for certain services in order to ameliorate child and family problems in the most effective way.

- *Complementary personnel/dollar agreements*. An organization commits personnel to provide services for children and families while other organizations reserve funds to pay for additional necessary and appropriate services.

- *Shared personnel agreements*. Personnel from different agencies work together in order to provide necessary services.

- *Shared facility agreements*. One agency may provide space for a second agency to provide services. For example, public schools may offer space for mental health counseling to take place.

- *Shared equipment and materials agreements*. One agency may share equipment and/or materials with a second agency. For example, hospital equipment may be used to screen children prior to entry into public school.

Unclear Priorities/Inconsistent Service Standards. Specific agreements addressing common goals, as well as quality of service standards, are absolute prerequisites to successful collaborative agreements. Commitments must be made with regard to the activity of each agency in terms of the needs of the individual, the needs of the family, and the capacity of the cooperating agencies to respond appropriately to these needs.

Lack of Communication Across Disciplines. For interagency collaboration to be effective, a structure designed to accommodate knowledge-sharing across all involved agencies must be designed and implemented. Differences in background and training of staff, agency terminology, the legal and ethical restraints of each agency, and labeling of individuals with disabilities all impede effective communication.

3. HOW CAN INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION BE IMPLEMENTED?

The ultimate goal of interagency collaboration is to coordinate programs and services for individuals with disabilities and their families who receive or require services from more than one provider agency. There is no magic recipe for implementing interagency collaboration, nor is there a "right way" or a "wrong way." Each school division, agency, or service provider may choose to develop its own collaborative model, duplicate an existing model, or modify a model to suit its own needs. Regardless of the method chosen to develop a team, the organizational structure and the strategies to be used must be reached through mutual agreement of all agencies involved.

Adapted from Lacour (1982), the following strategies or preconditions may help to prevent or resolve problems associated with interagency agreements. Specifically, all participants and agencies involved at the system level should

- Have a positive attitude toward collaboration and place a high priority on ameliorating student and family problems.

- Recognize a need for collaboration.
- Be informed about relevant laws.
- Get to know other interagency participants and establish a positive relationship with them.
- Learn the responsibilities of each agency and how each agency works.
- Identify the resources to be shared or exchanged and ensure that interagency agreements are reasonable.
- Be aware of the mutual benefit of interagency collaboration and resource sharing or exchange.
- Have a capacity for maintaining interagency collaboration and coordination.
- Put the agreement in writing in order to reinforce the commitment of participating agencies.
- Devise and implement evaluation procedures for the components of the agreement.
- Devise procedures for terminating the agreement if an agency wishes to withdraw.

Given these strategies, it is important to remember that mandated collaboration cannot require that participant attitudes be positive. However, for mandated collaboration to succeed, the interagency team must be convinced of the importance of collaboration and be provided with the resources needed to design, implement, and evaluate designated tasks.

Common Elements in Planning

Interagency collaboration agreements may differ depending on the size, location, and mission of the intervention. However, several common planning elements exist that contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of collaborative efforts.

Philosophical Stance. The philosophy of a team as well as of the individual team members not only provides the stimulus for interagency collaboration and cooperation, but also shapes the service delivery model.

Written Guidelines. A written statement delineating roles, responsibilities, shared financial resources, facilities, and time is essential to a comprehensive, systematized collaborative program. Informal coordination may be accomplished without putting anything in writing, but anything on a larger scale must have written clarification to avoid conflicts that could result from different interpretations of legislative mandates.

Mutual Need and Desire for Collaboration. Mandated agency collaboration will not be effective unless all participants view interagency collaboration as necessary and appropriate. Everyone involved also must be convinced of the importance of interagency collaboration, and the resources necessary to accomplish each task must be made available. Without a feeling of joint ownership, conflict and problems will erupt that will seriously limit the effectiveness of the program.

Staff Development. Cross-agency staff development can foster understanding of different agency policies, mandates, and restrictions as well as help in the development of roles and responsibilities for interagency team members. Staff development also should address communication and conflict resolution in order to enhance the working relationship among team members.

Team Leadership. Without someone assigned to provide direction and leadership for the team, there is little hope for success. Leadership functions may be shared by agencies, possibly on a rotating basis, but there must always be someone assigned as coordinator to ensure that necessary tasks are accomplished, keep the channels of communication open among all parties, take care of paperwork, provide technical assistance, and troubleshoot as necessary. The coordinator helps to ensure that agency representatives do not get caught up in their own concerns and thwart the cooperative effort (Missouri LINC, 1989).

Development of Interagency Collaboration

After agencies have established a common need and a commitment to collaborate, a team that will be both efficient and effective must be developed. McLaughlin (as cited in Missouri LINC, 1989) has suggested that to be effective, planners must begin with a plan that delineates reasonable expectations. The interagency collaboration must be implemented in a systematic manner, and communication among agencies must persist beyond implementation. To develop a team at the client level successfully, a number of steps must be considered. These steps begin with assessing the child and writing the IEP. They include the following:

- *Identifying participant agencies*. Once necessary and appropriate services for children with disabilities and their families have been determined, the agencies that are best able to provide these services must be identified. At the system level, most interagency collaboration teams will begin with the public schools, mental health, juvenile and

domestic court services, public health, and social services. Vocational rehabilitation, as well as other postsecondary service providers, also should be an integral part of the team. At the client level, identified child and family needs would determine which of the specific agencies would be involved. For a young child, specific agencies may include the schools to address academic needs, public health to address medical needs, and social services to address family needs. Probation and/or the court system may also be involved if the child has been adjudicated for a crime. For an individual making the transition from school to the workforce, the schools would be involved to address academic and training needs, social services might be involved to address living arrangements, and rehabilitation services would be involved to address job training and placement concerns. Finally, public health, probation, and/or the court system may be involved depending on the specific needs of the individual.

- *Selecting representatives to the team*. Agency representatives on the interagency collaboration team should possess decision-making authority within their own agencies. In addition to good communication skills, adaptability, and flexibility, they should have the capacity to commit themselves to the endeavors of the team for an extended period of time. Each representative should be a team player and should be able to gain personal satisfaction from the team's success. At the client level the parents should be involved to help determine appropriate goals and reinforce specific intervention strategies. Pragmatically, parent participation may facilitate the accomplishment of intervention goals in three distinct ways. First, the child may have needs that can be addressed most appropriately in an ecological fashion. Second, as team members the parents may feel a vested interest in the intervention procedures, thus facilitating the implementation process. Finally, the parents may have needs of their own that must be addressed.

- *Establishing a global mission/goal*. A clearly stated purpose is essential for the success of any team. This statement of purpose should be *written* in clear and understandable language and include reasons for the interagency agreement, responsibilities of each agency as well as methods for carrying them out, performance standards, and methods for modifying the agreement if necessary. The statement should be written to reflect and directly focus on the desired outcomes. Benefits to individual agencies must be clear, and mutual benefits must be evident. The collaborative agreement should include a plan for evaluating to what extent the goals are being met (LaCour, 1982; McLaughlin & Covert, 1984) (see Chapter 11).

- *Developing team identity*. To be effective, a team must work toward building trusting, open relationships wherein each of the team members is accepting of the others and their roles on the team. There must be team ownership, loyalty, and a clear understanding of the inner workings of each of the agencies involved. Each team member also must be committed. A process for decision making and conflict resolution should be determined in advance.

4. WHAT IS THE ADMINISTRATOR'S ROLE IN INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION?

The education administrator's role in the interagency process is to act as the catalyst and supporter to promote interagency collaboration. Since the public school is the only agency serving children and youth in which public law mandates zero rejects, it is reasonable to assume that education should be the catalyst to promote interagency collaboration. The public school administrator provides a direct link to the child, who is in the care of the school a minimum of 5 1/2 hours per day, and to the child's family. There is ample evidence to support the hypothesis that the school system should function as the primary service provider to promote interagency communication and cooperation in providing services for a community's children (Audette, n.d.).

Since the enactment of P.L. 94-142 in the middle 1970s, public education has worked diligently toward developing and implementing programs to address the needs of previously underserved or unserved youngsters. The efforts to serve these children have been successful in providing services within the school setting for most students with disabilities.

SUMMARY

This chapter acquaints the education administrator with the what, why, and how of interagency collaboration. Interagency collaboration involves joint planning, implementing, and evaluating between individuals and organizations in order to provide services for children with disabilities and their families. It is conducted on the system level or the client level. System-level collaboration is based on the premise that no one agency can provide all necessary services for children with disabilities and their families.

The need for interagency collaboration arises from the fact that community agencies historically do not coordinate services, which results in services that are less effective and more costly than they need to be. The Education of the Handicapped Act, enacted in 1966, and later legislation including Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, P.L. 99-457, and

the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act assure equal rights for individuals with disabilities. These laws also mandate that schools provide programs and services to individuals with disabilities. Interagency collaboration, as mandated by this legislation, has been determined to be the most effective and efficient manner in which to provide appropriate services.

Once agencies have determined a need to collaborate, team members must designate a plan with reasonable expectations for success. This plan must then be implemented systematically. During the implementation phase, communication among agencies must persist.

The education administrator's role in the interagency collaboration process is to act as the catalyst. Since the public schools are the only agency serving children in which public law mandates zero rejects, it is reasonable to assume that the schools should be the catalyst to promote interagency collaboration.

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